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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PINS PGOV VM ETMIN

SUBJECT: WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF THE ETHNICS

REF: HANOI 2885

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. VIETNAM'S MULTI-ETHNIC SOCIETY REMAINS
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HEAVILY DOMINATED BY THE MAJORITY ETHNIC KINH. ETHNIC
MINORITIES ARE OFTEN LOCATED IN ECONOMICALLY MARGINAL PARTS
OF VIETNAM, ESPECIALLY THE MOUNTAINOUS AREAS IN THE NORTH,
NORTHWEST, AND CENTRAL HIGHLANDS. THE GVN HAS UNDERTAKEN A
VARIETY OF PROGRAMS TO BRING GREATER SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS
TO THESE AREAS, TO PROMOTE ETHNIC MINORITY CADRES, AND TO
ENSURE PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION WITHIN THE NATIONAL
ASSEMBLY. THE EFFORTS BY THE GVN AND CPV TO EXTEND THEIR
REACH AND TO PROVIDE SERVICES DOWN TO THE LOWEST
ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS WITHIN THESE REMOTE AREAS IS
IMPRESSIVE, BUT PROBABLY HAS AS MUCH TO DO WITH CREATING AND
MAINTAINING SOCIAL ORDER AND POLITICAL CONTROL AS WITH
ENSURING THE GENERAL WELL-BEING OF THESE MINORITY
POPULATIONS. ALTHOUGH OFFICIALS WOULD PROBABLY DENY IT TO
THEIR LAST BREATH, MOST VIETNAMESE PROBABLY SEE ASSIMILATION
AS A DESIRABLE GOAL, AS WELL AS A NATURAL PRODUCT OF
MODERNIZATION. WHILE TRYING ECONOMICALLY TO WIN THE HEARTS
AND MINDS OF THE MINORITY POPULATIONS, AND POLITICALLY TO CO-
OPT THEM INTO THE SYSTEM, THE NET RESULT WILL LIKELY BE MORE
AND MORE ETHNIC MINORITIES WHO LOOK AND TALK LIKE EVERYONE
ELSE, APART FROM SPECIAL FESTIVALS IN WHICH THEY WEAR
"TRADITIONAL COSTUMES" AND PERFORM QUAIN T ETHNIC FOLK DANCES
AND SONGS. THERE ARE, HOWEVER, REGIONAL DISPARITIES IN HOW
FAR ALONG THIS PROCESS HAS ALREADY GONE. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) OFFICIAL GVN PROPAGANDA BOASTS OF VIETNAM'S ETHNIC
DIVERSITY, WITH 54 MAJOR GROUPS, OF WHICH THE MAJORITY KINH
COMPRISE OVER 85 PCT OF THE POPULATION. THE CONSTITUTION
(ARTICLE 5) GUARANTEES "EQUALITY, SOLIDARITY, AND MUTUAL
ASSISTANCE AMONG ALL NATIONALITIES," AND ALSO "FORBIDS ALL
ACTS OF NATIONAL DISCRIMINATION AND DIVISION." ONLY FIVE
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ETHNIC MINORITY GROUPS HAVE OVER ONE MILLION PEOPLE,
HOWEVER; FIVE OTHERS HAVE LESS THAN ONE THOUSAND PEOPLE, AND
ANOTHER 14 GROUPS HAVE FEWER THAN 10,000 PEOPLE, ACCORDING
TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS. STATE PROPAGANDA STRESSES THAT "NO
ETHNIC GROUP POSSESSES ITS OWN TERRITORY," THAT THERE ARE AT
LEAST SOME ETHNIC MINORITIES LIVING IN ALL 61 PROVINCES AND
CENTRALLY-CONTROLLED CITIES, AND THAT ONLY NINE PROVINCES
HAVE MORE THAN 50 PCT OF THEIR POPULATION COMPOSED OF ETHNIC
MINORITIES. AS NOTED IN REFTEL (WHICH EXAMINED ETHNIC
MINORITY EDUCATION), CAO BANG IN NORTHERN VIETNAM (WITH A
310 KILOMETER BORDER WITH CHINA) HAS THE HIGHEST
CONCENTRATION OF ETHNIC MINORITIES, MAKING UP 96.07 PCT OF
THE PROVINCIAL POPULATION.

THE VIEW FROM THE CENTER

3. (U) ACCORDING TO OFFICIALS AT THE ETHNIC MINORITIES
COMMISSION, IN ADDITION TO EXTENSIVE PROGRAMS FOR EDUCATION
AND FOR INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT (REFTEL), THE GVN ALSO
OFFERS SPECIAL ASSISTANCE TO ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE FORMS,
INTER ALIA, OF:
-- PRICE SUPPORTS TO EQUALIZE THE COSTS OF CERTAIN CONSUMER

COMMODITIES;
-- IN SOME LOCALITIES, DIRECT PAYMENTS OF UP TO 1 MILLION DONG (USD 70) PER FAMILY PER YEAR TO OFFSET HIGHER LIVING COSTS;
-- SOME FREE NEWSPAPER SUBSCRIPTIONS; AND,
-- SUBSIDIES FOR PHARMACEUTICALS IN SOME CASES, AND FREE CARE AT VILLAGE HEALTH CENTERS.

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14. (U) COMMISSION OFFICIALS HAVE CLAIMED IMPORTANT ECONOMIC PROGRESS VIS--VIS THE ETHNIC MINORITIES, AT LEAST SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE "DOI MOI" ECONOMIC RENOVATION PERIOD IN 1986. "HALF" OF THE MINORITY POPULATIONS HAVE BEEN "FREED FROM POVERTY," A MUCH MORE DRAMATIC RATE OF IMPROVEMENT THAN IN THE PREVIOUS DECADES OF VIETNAMESE SOCIALISM, THEY NOTED. AGRICULTURE HAS BEEN "MODERNIZED," WITH GREATER VARIETIES OF CROPS INTRODUCED. HIGHER LEVELS OF EDUCATION HAVE PRODUCED "MORE INTELLECTUAL" RURAL RESIDENTS AMONG THE MINORITIES. HOWEVER, OFFICIALS ADMITTED THAT "DISPARITIES WILL REMAIN" BETWEEN THE ETHNIC MINORITIES IN MOUNTAINOUS AREAS AND THE MAJORITY KINH, AND THAT THE STRUGGLE TO "RESOLVE THE PROBLEM OF SOCIAL EQUALITY" WILL CONTINUE TO POSE A CHALLENGE TO THE GVN. NOTABLY, EVEN IF VIETNAM MEETS THE GVN TARGET OF BECOMING A DEVELOPED COUNTRY BY 2020, THE MOUNTAINOUS AREAS "IN REALITY" WILL NOT MAKE IT TO THIS LEVEL, OFFICIALS READILY CONFESSED. ONE OF THE NEW CHALLENGES WILL BE TO BALANCE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN MOUNTAINOUS AREAS WITH ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, THEY ADDED.

15. (U) OFFICIALS AT THE COMMISSION AND AT THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY HAVE OFTEN CITED THE RELATIVELY HIGH NUMBERS OF ETHNIC MINORITIES (COMPARED TO THEIR PERCENTAGES OF THE POPULATION) WITHIN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. IN THE MAY 19 ELECTIONS, ALMOST 20 PCT OF THE CANDIDATES WERE ETHNIC

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MINORITIES. 61 PCT OF THESE CANDIDATES WON THEIR SEATS, PRODUCING A TOTAL OF 86 ETHNIC MINORITY DELEGATES (OUT OF 498 TOTAL DELEGATES -- ABOUT 17 PCT). NONG DUC MANH,
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GENERAL SECRETARY OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM (CPV), IS AN ETHNIC TAY FROM BAC KAN PROVINCE, AND THE HIGHEST RANKING ETHNIC MINORITY IN SRV HISTORY (OR VIETNAMESE HISTORY, FOR THAT MATTER). HE IS THE SOLE ETHNIC MINORITY MEMBER ON THE CPV POLITBURO, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE TEN OTHERS ON THE 150-PERSON CPV CENTRAL COMMITTEE. ONLY TWO AMONG THE 30 GVN MINISTERS (OR EQUIVALENTS) ARE ETHNIC MINORITIES: KSOR PHUOC, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES COMMISSION, AND QUACH LE THANH, THE CHIEF STATE INSPECTOR.

REALITIES IN THE NORTH: CAO BANG

16. (U) OFFICIALS IN CAO BANG PROVINCE PAINTED A ROSY PICTURE OF INTER-ETHNIC HARMONY DURING POL/C'S NOVEMBER VISIT. ETHNIC TAY MAKE UP THE PLURALITY OF THE POPULATION, WITH 40 PCT; ETHNIC KINH COMPOSE LESS THAN 5 PCT. THEY CLAIMED THAT 80 PCT OF ALL CADRES IN THE PROVINCE CAME FROM ONE OF THE EIGHT ETHNIC GROUPS, WITH PERCENTAGES OF ETHNIC MINORITY CADRES EVEN HIGHER AT THE VILLAGE AND COMMUNE LEVELS. A SIMILAR RATIO EXISTS WITHIN THE PROVINCIAL PEOPLE'S COUNCIL, WHILE 100 PCT OF ITS NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DELEGATES ARE ETHNIC MINORITIES, THEY CLAIMED. (ACTUALLY,

ONE CAO BANG NA DELEGATE -- NGUYEN HONG VINH, CPV CENTRAL COMMITTEE MEMBER AND STANDING DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CC'S IDEOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DEPARTMENT AS WELL AS PRESIDENT OF VIETNAM JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION -- IS AN ETHNIC KINH.) CAO BANG ALSO CLAIMED A 100 PCT TURNOUT RATE AT THE MAY 19 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS (NOTE: AN ASTONISHING FEAT ANYWHERE, MUCH LESS IN SUCH A MOUNTAINOUS AND REMOTE AREA. END NOTE).

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17. (U) ACCORDING TO PROVINCIAL VICE CHAIRMAN HOANG VAN KHOI (HIMSELF AN ETHNIC TAY), THE VARIOUS ETHNIC GROUPS NOT ONLY INCREASINGLY LIVE IN MIXED COMMUNITIES BUT ALSO NOWADAYS MARRY EACH OTHER MORE FREQUENTLY. (HE IS MARRIED TO AN ETHNIC KINH, WHO SPEAKS FLUENT TAY, HE SAID.) HE CLAIMED THAT THERE WAS NOT, AND HAD NEVER HAD BEEN, ANY FIGHTING AMONG ETHNIC GROUPS. THE CURRENT REALITY, HE NOTED, WAS THAT IT WAS MORE AND MORE DIFFICULT TO DIFFERENTIATE AMONG THE ETHNIC MINORITIES, SINCE VIRTUALLY ALL HAVE TURNED TO MORE "CONVENIENT" WESTERN-STYLE CLOTHES, AND SPEAK VIETNAMESE EXCEPT PERHAPS AT HOME. LOCAL MARRIAGE TRADITIONS MIRROR THOSE OF THE MAJORITY KINH: 90 PCT OF BRIDES GO TO LIVE WITH THEIR HUSBAND'S FAMILIES, OFFICIALS CLAIMED.

18. (U) VICE CHAIRMAN KHOI AND OTHER SENIOR OFFICIALS DESCRIBED A PROVINCE THAT HAS "VERY LITTLE RELIGION," WHICH THEY ASCRIBED TO THE NON-RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES (AS OPPOSED TO THE MORE TRADITIONALLY BUDDHIST KINH, FOR EXAMPLE). KHOI SAID THERE WERE "ONLY A FEW" BUDDHIST TEMPLES IN THE ENTIRE PROVINCE, ALTHOUGH THERE WERE SOME TRADITIONAL "HALLS" FOR ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND OTHER COMMUNAL "CULTURAL" ACTIVITIES. HE CLAIMED THAT THERE WERE "NO" PROTESTANT CHURCHES, EVEN AMONG THE HMONG, AND ONLY "SOME" CATHOLIC CHURCHES, INCLUDING ONE LARGE FRENCH-ERA CHURCH PERCHED ON A HILLSIDE IN DOWNTOWN CAO BANG CITY. KHOI SAID HE BELIEVED THAT THERE WAS ONLY ONE CATHOLIC PRIEST IN THE ENTIRE PROVINCE.

ANOTHER REALITY CHECK: BAC KAN
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19. (U) OFFICIALS IN BAC KAN PROVINCE DESCRIBED A VARIETY OF RURAL DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRAMS TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF ETHNIC MINORITIES, WHO MAKE UP ABOUT 55 PCT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION, ACCORDING TO NATIONAL STATISTICS. (NOTE: PROVINCIAL OFFICIALS CLAIMED THAT ETHNIC KINH MADE UP ONLY ABOUT 15 PCT OF THE PROVINCIAL POPULATION, WHILE ETHNIC TAY REPRESENTED 50 PCT OF THE TOTAL, BUT THE ETHNIC MINORITIES COMMISSION IN HANOI SUBSEQUENTLY INSISTED THAT ITS STATISTICS WERE MORE ACCURATE. END NOTE) THEY EXPRESSED HOPE THAT THE DEVELOPMENT OF PROVEN EXTENSIVE MINERAL RESOURCES WILL BE ATTRACTIVE TO FOREIGN INVESTORS (INCLUDING FROM THE U.S.), ALONG WITH THE PROCESSING OF BAC KAN'S LARGE TIMBER RESERVES. THEY ACKNOWLEDGED THE DANGERS OF ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN THIS DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS, AS WELL AS THE PROBLEMS CAUSED BY THE CURRENTLY POOR ROAD LINKS WITH HANOI AND OTHER MARKETS.

10. (U) PROVINCIAL CADRES ARE VIRTUALLY ALL ETHNIC MINORITIES, OFFICIALS CLAIMED, WITH THE MAJORITY BELONGING TO THE TAY GROUP. FOUR OUT OF BAC KAN'S SIX NEW NATIONAL ASSEMBLY DELEGATES ARE ETHNIC MINORITIES; THE TWO ETHNIC KINH DELEGATES ARE HANOI RESIDENTS (ONE IS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER PHAM GIA KHIEM). NATIVE SON NONG DUC MANH DID NOT

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RUN IN BAC KAN, BUT INSTEAD WAS A SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATE FOR HANOI'S CONSTITUENCY #1.

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11. (U) BAC KAN OFFICIALS, INCLUDING PROVINCIAL VICE CHAIRMAN NONG VAN LENH, CLAIMED "EXCELLENT" RELATIONS AMONG THE SEVEN MAIN ETHNIC GROUPS, INCLUDING INCREASING LEVELS OF INTER-MARRIAGE. THEY NOTED "NO DISCRIMINATION" AMONG THE ETHNIC GROUPS, BUT ADMITTED THAT THE HMONG GROUP WAS LESS WELL INTEGRATED DUE PRIMARILY TO THEIR MORE REMOTE LOCATIONS AND LESS FREQUENT INTER-ACTION. AS IN CAO BANG, BAC KAN OFFICIALS PORTRAYED THEIR PROVINCIAL POPULATION AS LARGELY NON-RELIGIOUS, APART FROM GENERALLY SHARED TRADITIONS OF ANCESTOR WORSHIP. THEY CLAIMED THAT THERE WAS "LITTLE" BUDDHISM, AND ONLY "A FEW" CATHOLICS, WHO HAD NEITHER CHURCH NOR PRIEST. AMONG THE HMONG (ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO EMIGRATED FROM CHINA IN OR SHORTLY AFTER 1979, THEY NOTED), THERE WERE SOME PROTESTANTS, BUT WITH NO FORMAL CHURCHES OR PASTORS. THEY ADMITTED THAT RELIGIOUS BROADCASTING IN THE HMONG LANGUAGE FROM THE PHILIPPINES WAS HAVING SOME IMPACT IN ATTRACTING NEW BELIEVERS, HOWEVER. THEY ADDED THAT THERE HAD BEEN "NO REQUESTS" TO REGISTER ANY CHURCHES, NOR HAD THERE EVER BEEN "ANY PROBLEMS" WITH RELIGIOUS BELIEF, HOWEVER. THEY CATEGORICALLY DENIED ANY EFFORTS BY OFFICIALS TO FORCE RELIGIOUS BELIEVERS TO RECENT.

12. (U) OFFICIALS NOTED THAT SOME ETHNIC MINORITIES -- PRIMARILY TAY, HMONG, AND DAO -- FROM BAC KAN HAD BEEN AMONG THOSE WHO HAD MIGRATED IN RECENT YEARS TO THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, BUT DESCRIBED THESE AS STRICTLY "VOLUNTARY" RE-LOCATIONS. "MANY" HAD SUBSEQUENTLY RETURNED IN RECENT YEARS, DESCRIBING EVEN GREATER HARDSHIPS IN THE CENTRAL HIGHLANDS, THEY NOTED, HOWEVER.

COMMENT: LOOKING MORE ALIKE

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13. (SBU) IN THESE MOUNTAINOUS AREAS, ALONG WINDING, RUDIMENTARY, AND SOMETIMES DANGEROUS "ROADS," THE OUTREACH OF THE GVN -- AND CPV -- IS FAIRLY IMPRESSIVE. SCHOOLS, MEDICAL CLINICS, POST OFFICES, AND, INCREASINGLY, ELECTRICITY OFTEN REACH DOWN TO VERY REMOTE SETTLEMENTS, ALONG WITH THE PERVASIVE DUAL SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT AND PARTY CADRES. THE GVN APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN METICULOUS AS WELL IN SETTLING UP THE FULL PANOPLY OF REPRESENTATIVE ORGANS -- "THE PEOPLE'S COUNCILS" -- DOWN TO THE LOCAL LEVEL. THE 2002 NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS WERE NOTABLE BY CLEARLY IDENTIFYING THE ETHNIC BACKGROUND OF ALL CANDIDATES AND IN RETURNING A SLIGHTLY HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF ETHNIC MINORITY DELEGATES THAN THEIR SHARE OF THE POPULATION WOULD STATISTICALLY WARRANT. GVN OFFICIALS LIKE TO BOAST THAT SUCH RESULTS PUT VIETNAM AHEAD OF THE U.S. IN ENSURING FAIR REPRESENTATION OF ALL ETHNIC MINORITIES, AT LEAST WITHIN THE NATIONAL LEGISLATURE.

14. (SBU) GVN AND CPV EFFORTS TO ORGANIZE DOWN TO THE GRASSROOTS LIKELY MORE PROFOUNDLY REFLECT THE CPV'S LENINIST MODEL THAN ITS CONCERN FOR THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES -- ALTHOUGH SUCH CONCERN CLEARLY DOES EXIST. UPON ACHIEVING FIRST INDEPENDENCE AND LATER NATIONAL UNIFICATION, THE GVN/CPV'S TOP PRIORITY WAS ON CREATING SOCIAL ORDER AND ENSURING UNCHALLENGED CPV RULE. GIVEN THE HISTORICAL ISOLATION OF SOME ETHNIC GROUPS -- AND IN SOME CASES, OPPOSITION TO THE CPV (ALTHOUGH SOME ETHNIC GROUPS, ESPECIALLY IN THE NORTH, WORKED CLOSELY WITH THE CPV EVEN IN ITS INFANCY) -- THE GVN AND CPV VIEWED A STRONG

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ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORK AS ESSENTIAL; IN MANY PLACES, SUCH AN OFFICIAL PRESENCE WAS ALSO UNPRECEDENTED. THE ECONOMIC RESULTS MAY HAVE BEEN MARGINAL (AS ELSEWHERE IN VIETNAM) UNTIL THE DOI MOI ERA, BUT THE GVN HAS SINCE 1986 -- AND ESPECIALLY OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS -- DEVOTED EVER-HIGHER LEVELS OF RESOURCES AIMED AT THE MOUNTAINOUS AREAS. OFFICIALS ARE UNDOUBTEDLY RIGHT IN ASSESSING THAT THEY CANNOT ELIMINATE THE DISPARITIES WITH LOWLAND AREAS AND ESPECIALLY WITH URBAN CENTERS (THOSE GAPS MAY INDEED NOW BE WIDENING), BUT CURRENT EFFORTS ARE IN MANY CASES PAYING OFF IN IMPROVING LIVING STANDARDS AND IN WINNING SOME ADDITIONAL LOYALTY AND GRATITUDE AMONG MANY OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE NORTH AND NORTHWEST.

14. (SBU) THE COMBINED EFFECT OF VIETNAM'S TOP-DOWN SYSTEM AND ITS UNITARY EDUCATIONAL AND CADRE MODELS IS, INEVITABLY, GROWING ASSIMILATION OF THE ETHNIC MINORITIES, ALTHOUGH GVN

OFFICIALS WOULD DENY EMPHATICALLY THAT THIS IS A GOAL. AS MORE AND MORE ETHNIC MINORITIES TURN TO "WESTERN" GARB -- OFTEN NOTING HOW "UNCOMFORTABLE" TRADITIONAL CLOTHES ARE -- AND LEARN VIETNAMESE IN SCHOOL AND IN THE WORKPLACE, THEY DO LOOK AND ACT MORE AND MORE LIKE THE MAJORITY KINH. INCREASED INTER-MARRIAGE AND MOBILITY WILL HEIGHTEN THIS TREND. THE GVN DOES WHAT IT CAN TO ENCOURAGE TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS (WHICH ITS TOURISM OFFICIALS RECOGNIZE CAN BE A

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GOOD MARKETING HOOK), CEREMONIAL WEARING OF TRIBAL CLOTHES (ESPECIALLY FOR THOSE TELEVISED NATIONAL ASSEMBLY EVENTS), AND PERFORMANCE OF ETHNIC SONGS AND DANCES, BUT THESE WILL
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LIKELY MORE AND MORE BECOME QUAIN T CULTURAL ODDITIES, RATHER THAN REPRESENT VIBRANT ETHNIC MINORITY TRADITIONS. REGIONAL DISPARITIES, AS WELL AS POSSIBLY GREATER RESISTANCE TO CHANGE AMONG SOME ETHNIC GROUPS, WILL MAKE THIS AN UNEVEN PROCESS, HOWEVER.
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